

E-Learning Trends Today and Beyond

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By: [Mark W. Brodsky](#)

News

New developments are occurring in e-learning training at a breakneck pace. What trends are hottest, and which will impact your business most? Find out what three leading experts have to say as they turn on their high beams and look into the future 18 to 24 months out.

Business drives trends

Any discussion of trends needs to begin with a general understanding of the business issues behind the trends. From a delivery standpoint, more and more businesses will continue to recognize e-learning's ability to quickly and effectively build knowledge and develop certain skills while dramatically reducing training-related costs. This is true not only for internal training purposes but for training customers as well--a trend our experts see as rapidly growing in force as more and more consumers go online to learn how to best use a company's products and services.

Businesses will begin to focus more than ever on the practical aspect of e-learning--its effective implementation. The infatuation with the technology in and of itself will continue to fade away as businesses search for best practices that improve the overall effectiveness of e-learning and its ROI. Future growth and continued expansion of e-learning will occur as more and more organizations learn how to successfully implement e-learning that generates desired business results.

Further emergence of simulation

Another business driver that will ultimately perpetuate an important trend in e-learning, specifically the greater use of simulation-based e-learning, is the migration of more and more services to automated or "self-service" applications. With the greater use of self-service applications, the type of training organizations provide their employees will change.

For example, just about every company today is looking for ways to automate routine customer service options that are typically handled by live representatives. They are also looking for more effective ways to train consumers on products and services online. It's important to note that the push towards self-service is not only driven by a desire to increase operational efficiency and effectiveness, it's equally driven by clients who prefer to use self-service options. From a learning standpoint, this changes the nature of many companies' training programs. With routine transactions being handled through automated systems or online, customer service and sales representatives need to be better equipped to handle the more complex transactions requiring a higher level of knowledge and interaction skills.

According to Gloria Gery of Gery Associates, good simulation-based e-learning has already proven itself as an effective solution for helping organizations develop more advanced skills such as decision-making and business communication skills.

Simulation-based e-learning is also particularly useful in standardizing practices throughout the organization. "All good simulations are built on models of how business works," says Mike Flanagan, vice president of research and consulting for Lguide. "The goal is to raise the consistency of representatives' skills throughout the organization."

There is a continued trend to use simulations for screening. Even before hiring, simulation models are now emerging for use in the screening of prospective employees. Paul Stockford, chief analyst for Saddletree Research, notes, "Simulation is becoming much more prevalent in pre-qualifying applicants. Simulations can now help you determine pretty quickly if someone has the patience and aptitude to deal effectively with the issues and types of customers who patronize a given business."

However, the experts also warned against using simulation-training programs for pre-employment purposes if the program was not originally designed for screening. This is because the objectives and content for screening differ greatly (and in very important ways) than the objectives and content for training.

One key difference is that training simulations are designed to measure a person's acquisition of job-related skills and knowledge--such as the proper way to work with customers, procedures, or product information--after they

have been exposed to it. There is a real cost to providing this learning experience and most organizations only want to make that investment in people who are capable of taking advantage of it.

Effective pre-employment screens should measure the core competencies that a person is expected to have before training and the ones the company is not willing to train for such as personality traits and problem-solving ability. (These may be too difficult or expensive to warrant training). If a candidate has adequate levels of these core competencies, chances are the individual will usually turn out to be a good hiring decision. There is a sufficient degree of confidence that the individual can acquire knowledge and develop other job-related skills, including those that many simulation-based e-learning programs help develop such as customer service, sales and coaching skills.

'Proactive' blended learning

Blended learning has come to describe a well thought-out combination of e-learning and other training methods. Gery sees blended learning as something that has always been there. "Classroom training has always been combined with mentoring, role-playing, coaching, and other techniques. People tend to see things in binary terms, as all one thing or all another," she says. While blended learning isn't a new concept, Gery and other experts endorse its value and note that the future trend will use the concept of blended learning more effectively.

Flanagan makes an important distinction between proactive and reactive blending. "I'm in full agreement about the value of blended learning," Flanagan explains. "What you'll see is a shift from reactive blending to proactive blending. The initial excitement and trend was toward putting everything online. But the industry rapidly discovered that you can't do that and shouldn't do that."

Flanagan cautions that blended learning can simply be a crutch for a poorly designed e-learning solution. "The initial reaction of the industry was, 'If there is something wrong with your e-learning, just blend around it.' That's what I call reactive blending. The alternative is proactive blending, which means taking into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of technology-mediated learning. Pay a lot of attention to what it does and doesn't do well and then build an integrated solution that makes a lot more sense."

Integrating content into context

The nature of how instruction is "pushed out" to workers at their desktop, in other work environments, or made available to them at their requests is also expected to change over the next year or two. "I think that the trend toward integrating content into context is probably going to be the major direction," says Gery.

"Content comes in many forms and all content has a very specific purpose," Gery adds. "One purpose is just the presentation of bits of information as needed, but for something like instructional training, content is organized in a very different way."

To date, there has been a preponderance of e-learning in the marketplace that literally showers people with information, a good portion of which does not necessarily relate to an employee's job, the task they are asked to perform at a given moment, nor their particular developmental needs. Learners have to "mine" through the information to isolate what does and does not apply.

Making performance data meaningful

While the experts agreed on the importance of gathering performance optimization data and feeding it back to improve employee performance further, they noted a danger in overwhelming employees and their managers with too much information. The key is to find and then share the "pivotal" performance data - one or two nuggets of information that have the greatest impact on the job at a particular time and for a particular task.

To get to the pivotal performance data you will need well-trained managers who are skilled in the art of coaching--perhaps one of the greatest and most woefully underutilized performance optimization tools in organizations today. It is only through thoughtful, targeted performance coaching, between an employee and his or her manager, where this information is best translated into meaningful terms and delivered in just the right amount, when it's needed most.

The use of effective coaching will transcend the use of technology when it comes to truly optimizing e-learning and on-the-job performance. At the end of the day, e-learning purposefully combined with ongoing performance

coaching will provide a connection for organizations. They need this link to ensure that the skills learned in training are calibrated, developed, and reinforced further on the job, and that people are held accountable for their own performances.

Measuring real ROI

Flanagan expands on the potential future of data captured at the desktop and forecasts its ability to more accurately measure the ROI of training dollars. "Training evaluation has always had as its 'holy grail' the ability to accurately measure impact on the job, or return on investment. It's been the worst kept secret in the industry that ROI has been nearly impossible to measure accurately because of all the statistical noise," he says.

Flanagan adds, "Without data interception at the desktop, you have to go out 'scraping' up data from people's memories after the fact. When you have it there in the database, you can slice it and dice it and really start doing some interesting statistical models to see what is really working and what isn't."

Even with the improvements in isolating and collecting meaningful performance and other ROI data, the real trend will continue to be using this information to gain evidence of training ROI--not absolute proof. The phrase "paralysis by analysis" particularly applies. At some point there is a diminishing return to gaining 100-percent proof that ROI was achieved directly as a result of a particular e-learning initiative. Smart organizations will learn how to make better decisions based on the evidence they gather, even though it will still be difficult to prove an absolute cause and effect.

Convergence and the future of e-learning

What does all of this mean? And, ultimately, how will an understanding of these trends help us make better business decisions when it comes to e-learning?

There is a theme running through the trend discussion; a theme easily summed up in one word: convergence. E-learning is increasingly converging with other management tools, providing managers with a unified view of all financial, customer and employee considerations. In this sense, we are moving one step closer to becoming more effective "learning organizations."

What's also becoming clear, moving beyond the next 18 to 24 months and looking further into the future is that training technologies will become so smart and intuitive that technology will no longer be the focus. It will be replaced by the application and how it serves their business needs.

Consider a recent interview Bill Gates gave the media. When he was asked to comment on the future of technology, he indicated, "Computers will become passé." He noted that computers will be built into just about everything we use with applications that are so intuitive and advanced that people will not focus on the fact that a computer is even involved.

We see this already in many of the products we use. Computers "drive" our cars and "power" our major appliances. But when we purchase these items, we aren't focusing on the computer. Just recently a manufacturer touted a new coat it was producing with fibers that become warmer or cooler depending on the outdoor temperature. Is this manufacturer selling computers? No, he's selling coats. Behind the scenes is the computer, the technology, driving the purchase, and use of the product.

This same type of trend appears to be happening with respect to e-learning. Beyond the next two years, computer-based training will become more and more embedded into and intermingled with business tasks, tools, processes and applications. Soon the computer won't be the focus. Ultimately the concentration will be on helping employees with the tasks they need to do, when they need to do them.

A final thought

Unquestionably, e-learning will continue to grow in our organizations. In anticipation of this growth, companies can start focusing on applications and the effective and efficient implementation of e-learning. This will move them closer to seamless integration of e-learning into their organization's performance management and other key processes. By recognizing that e-learning truly is a methodology, a "behind the scenes" driver propelling business forward, companies can experience the greatest benefits that e-learning has to offer now and in the future.